

HYPERRALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Sculptural Wizardry and Other Playful Exuberance

by Howard Hurst on September 20, 2011



Michelle Lopez, "Your Board" (2011)



Michelle Lopez, "Blue Angels" (2011)

I've been a pretty huge fan of sculptor Michelle Lopez ever since her first show at the Simon Preston gallery on the Lower east side. When I found out a couple weeks ago about her impending second solo show at the gallery, I was pretty nervous. Granted, I shouldn't have been, but let neurotic by-gones be by-gones. I am the first to admit that change makes me uncomfortable I hate change. It just doesn't sit well with me. As a child nothing was more miserable than waking up one day to find out that my favorite Power Rangers sweatshirt no longer fit me. Needless to say, when an artist produces a new body of work it can be pretty stressful for everyone involved. I often worry about losing what I love about it and so am probably sometimes unfairly critical.

The exhibition *Verticle Neck* is far more targeted, restrained, and specific than anything else I've seen from the artist. Her first exhibition, which featured a raucous conglomeration of surrealistic objects seemed to relish the magical in the mundane. The newest body of work consists of three vertically oriented "series" hanging against or propped up by the walls of the gallery. They seem at first glance like a subtle departure from her last exhibition. Perhaps this is the beginning of a slightly more subdued, restrained body of work. While she has always seemed to have an eye for the history of sculpture, these pieces seem to aggressively engage in that dialogue.

Her series Flare, consisting of serial monochromatic sculptures, takes its name from a John McCracken sculpture of the same name. Her Blue Angels series of ten-foot mirrored aluminum lean against the gallery wall like sardonic footnotes to the history of minimalism. The gallery press release draws parallels between these works, airplane fuselages and John Chamberlain. While I get immediately put off by direct references to the work of “late great” artists — especially when it’s coming from a gallery — those ties are definitely there. These shiny, monochromatic works do seem to update the aesthetic of those famous minimalists. The unique vertical “Flare” daubed with automotive paint, pinned in serial against the wall, have a type of mass-produced quality. On closer inspection they sag and flab like an ivy plant of deflated party balloons.



Michelle Lopez, “Flare” (2011)

Though Vertical Neck feels a bit more restrained, a bit cooler and a bit shinier, underlying the whole endeavor is the artist's familiar interest in transmuting materials and expectations. What draws me to her work is the sensitivity with which she treats her subjects and materials.

“Blue angels” are hulking and metallic, gigantic monoliths of factory produced industrial materials. They look heavy, brash and expensive. Again, up close the material also seems thin, folded upon itself in delicate layers. The result is a kind of dramatic industrial tin foil; an object that fluctuates between heavy, permanent epic-ness and a sort of lightweight ephemeral aesthetic. There is a magic deeply seated within this sort of uncertainty, an aura of possibility and un-reality. Her work “Your Board” (2011) continues an artistic riff from her first exhibition at the gallery. A series of plywood and grip tape sculptures evoke the form and function of a skateboard oozing and dripping lazily.

Her army of skateboards read much differently than they did in the first show. While there is undoubtedly still the scent of alchemical dust in the air, this time the target seems to be sculpture itself. While the objects in Vertical Neck are fanciful and anthropomorphic, the real effort seems to be leveled at giving the sometimes disconnected and esoteric language of sculpture a bit of reality — however mutant a strand — to stand in. This is a refreshing sentiment in an art world that half-heartedly references mysticism and magic about as often as I ask for hot sauce at breakfast. For all the serious-esque constraints of the exhibition, a playful exuberance emanates throughout the space. That seems to be Lopez's strength. If you can make John McCracken into skateboarding, tin foil and party balloons then I think it's safe to say that you're a pretty good wizard.

Michelle Lopez's Vertical Neck is at Simon Preston Gallery (301 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) until October 30.